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THALES TURNTABLE AND X-QUISITE CARTRIDGE - SUBLIME BATTERY-POWERED VINYL

Meze Audio Elite over-ear headphones

by Simon Lucas



One might almost describe it as a flurry of activity. In the first decade of his company's existence, Antonio Meze has overseen the launch of precisely half a dozen products – and a solid half of them have been launched in the last 18 months.

Products four and five are both in-ear monitors of differing complexity and cost. The sixth is this pair of over-ear headphones – it's the most expensive product in the current Meze Audio portfolio. And given that Meze Audio tries its utmost to make a statement, both in terms of specification and design, even when the product in question is a £179 in-ear monitor, it

seems reasonable to expect a pretty sizable statement when Meze Audio launches a £3,699 isodynamic hybrid array over-ear headphone that sits right at the top of its suddenly burgeoning model range.

Not for the first time where a Meze Audio product is concerned, the Elite has been designed to within an inch of its life. We'll discuss the novel and clever technologies ►



“As you might confidently predict, on the inside, the Elite is as individual as it is on the outside.”

rejected because perfection isn't enough for Antonio Meze and the team. Inside this frame, the open-backed cover is perforated with a fairly complicated repeating design that is, once again, painstakingly adjudicated by Meze's obsessive-compulsives. There's nothing so gauche as a hanger arrangement here – instead, what we have is a system using carbon-fibre 'suspension wings' (patent pending), in conjunction with a slender leather headband. That's two more materials, and two more patterns/textures to add to the list – and an overall design that will double the width of the average wearer's head.

Mind you, there's no arguing with the effectiveness of this arrangement. The Elite, which is hand-assembled in Romania, weigh a significant 430g, but thanks to the way the 'wings and headband' arrangement distributes weight across the wearer's head they remain comfortable for hours on end.

The Elite are supplied with a choice of earpads. There is a pair of alcantara pads, 30mm deep, based on the design Meze originally developed for 2018's Empyrean on-ear headphone, and an alternative hybrid design of alcantara core with leather exterior. Meze suggests this new hybrid arrangement reduces bass pressure and offers a more airy sonic signature. You'll need to specify the kind of cable you require, though – Meze Audio offers its '4 mini-pin XLR plug' cable with 3.5mm, 6.3mm or 4-pin XLR terminations, but you can only have one. Unless you want to pay a little more, of course.

As you might confidently predict, on the inside the Elite is as individual as it is on the outside. Not for the first time, Meze Audio has worked in close collaboration with Ukraine's Rinaro Isodynamics – and for this headphone, Rinaro has developed the MZ3SE 'Isodynamic Hybrid Array' driver. A refinement of the MZ3 driver Rinaro delivered for the Empyrean headphone, the MZ3SE is a three-part driver designed to deliver selective acoustic performance for the different areas of the listener's ear structure.

At the back of the driver is the hybrid magnet array, arranged to develop uniform activation across the whole surface of the diaphragm. At the front there's a reinforced polymer housing. And in between sits Rinaro's 'Parus' diaphragm, which somehow manages to combine an active area of 4650mm² with an all-in weight of 0.11g – this, says Rinaro, is due to its manufacturing process, which involves stretching the polymer, at temperature, in transverse directions. This improves structural strength, stiffness and stability despite the remarkably low mass.

By way of an encore, Rinaro has stamped the diaphragm with a dual coil arrangement. On the upper part of the diaphragm there's a 'switchback' coil, with responsibility for reproducing lower frequencies, and towards the bottom ▶

▶ that have been deployed here, but first it's worth taking a moment to consider the sheer amount of designing that has gone on. After all, over-ear headphones tend to have their form dictated by their function – and, broadly speaking, that's the case with the Elite too. But no material has been left undeployed, no decorative pattern deemed too arcane, no headband arrangement considered too extreme by Meze Audio when it comes to the design of the Elite.

Consider the aluminium earcup frame. It's a complex shape, and assertively three-dimensional where it joins the sliding headband adjustment arrangement. This isn't the kind of shape that's easy to make and comes with a lot of 'almost' earcups getting

“Where rhythmic positivity is concerned, the Elite are among the most accomplished headphones around – at any price.”

► of the diaphragm there’s a spiral coil. A spiral arrangement is more adept at dealing with frequencies in the midrange and above, and its position means it’s sited more-or-less directly over the wearer’s ear canal. This, suggests Meze Audio, overcomes the tendency for the soundfield to become diffused when soundwave length is smaller than the physical depth of the inside of the ear cushion.

So with the Elite sitting comfortably in situ at one end of the chain, and attached variously to the headphone socket of a Naim Uniti Star or to an iFi iDSD Diablo being fed by an Apple MacBook Pro at the other, listening can get under way. It’s an activity best undertaken in private, mind you, because a) the Elite are quite leaky through those elaborately carved earcups, and b) it’s all too easy for bystanders to mock your appearance when the Elite are in position.

The White Stripes’ *Ball and Biscuit* [XL] is a recording with dirt under its fingernails, its eyes out on stalks and its heart racing uncomfortably in its chest – and when it’s delivered to the Meze Audio Elite by the iFi DAC/headphone amp, it’s absolutely unequivocal. Yes, the Elite offer an extremely impressive degree of insight, they control and integrate the frequency range with absolute authority, and they make the filthy analogue tonality sound just as ragged and overdriven as it’s supposed to... but most of all, they give the queasy head-rush levels of attack complete expression. The sheer abandon of this recording can be made obvious by far less capable headphones than these, but you’ve seldom (if at all) heard it sound quite so unhinged, quite so filled with latent threat.

The altogether more considered sound of *Mountains* by Prince & The New Power Generation [Paisley Park] is no less compelling in the Elite’s hands. Like all the best Prince songs, *Mountains* sounds like a high-class demo – and the Elite gives the spaces, the absences and the silences that constitute a big part of this recording full expression. The level of bite and drive they summon is deeply impressive – the steroid-assisted horn section has never sounded more clipped or austere, the vocal has never sounded more impassioned, the drag on the kick drum has never sounded so deliberate. Whatever the intentions of a recording are, it seems, the Elite have no trouble understanding them.

Some of this is down to the unforced and convincing nature of their tonality – deep, textured and straight-edged low frequencies are complemented by a deftly informative, naturalistic midrange and crisply substantial top end. Some of it concerns the amount of detail the Meze can reveal – ‘torrential’ isn’t too strong a word to describe it. Some of it will be to do with Elite’s mastery of dynamic expression – from small embouchure variations to the simple ‘loud/quiet/wildly overdriven’ dynamics of the two recordings already mentioned, the Meze Audio Elite have no problem laying it all out for your inspection. And where rhythmic positivity is concerned, the Elite are among the most accomplished headphones around – at any price. The judicious tempo

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: open-back, over-ear headphone

Drivers: isodynamic hybrid array

Frequency Response: 3Hz–112kHz
(claimed)

Impedance: 32ohm

Distortion: <0.05%

Sensitivity: not quoted

Accessories: aluminium case

Weight: 430g

Price: £3,699

Manufacturer: Meze Audio

URL: mezeaudio.com

UK Distributor: SCV Distribution

Tel (UK only): 0330 122 2500

URL: scvdistribution.co.uk

and rhythm of the Prince recording is given complete expression – as far as the Meze Audio are concerned, it may as well be 1986.

In sonic terms, the Meze Audio Elite have next-to-nothing to apologise for. If we’re going to indulge in gratuitous nit-pickery, they could conceivably be more forceful where the lowest frequencies in LCD Soundsystem’s *Daft Punk is Playing at My House* [DFA] – but that would be asking the Elite to impose themselves on a recording and, as already observed, that’s never their inclination.

You’ve only a couple of hurdles to clear before you can bask in the remarkable fidelity of these headphones. The first, of course, is the asking-price – because it’s not just the almost-£4K you’ll need to find, it’s also the considerable outlay on source equipment that’s capable of doing them some justice. And then there’s the strong design elements, which take Elite far away from the cigar humidior aesthetics of the highly polished wood-finished high-end designs currently so popular in high-end headphones. Regardless, with the Meze Audio Elite profound sonic gratification can be yours. +